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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO FORMER TORTURE CENTER WELL RECEIVED

¶1. Summary: An unpublicized visit by Ambassador Kelly to Villa Grimaldi -- a Pinochet-era torture center (now a memorial park) -- received favorable media attention and commentary. The certified guide of the site (a Villa Grimaldi survivor) praised the Ambassador for taking the initiative, and later spread news of the visit via e-mail throughout the human rights community. That e-mail generated the media coverage and an interview. The Ambassador used the opportunity to express sympathy for the torture victims, with the hope that this memorial park would contribute to the spirit of "Never Again." and underscored that all human rights abuses, regardless of political origin, must be condemned. End Summary.

¶2. For more than two hours on January 30, the Ambassador visited the Villa Grimaldi Peace Park, a detention and torture center where approximately 240 Chileans disappeared or died under the Pinochet regime between 1973 and 1978. Villa Grimaldi guide Pedro Alejandro Matta -- one of the site's approximately 5000 targeted victims -- described in detail the systematic and brutal treatment of detainees. Matta also identified the location of Villa Grimaldi's torture chambers (electricity, water and hanging sites), recovery cells, separate male and female jails, and the isolation tower. (The Pinochet government had destroyed all but one of the structures in the late 1980s in an alleged attempt to cover up its dirty work.)

President Bachelet Detained at Villa Grimaldi

¶3. Matta noted that President Bachelet and her mother had been detained in Villa Grimaldi before going into exile. Wife of an anti-coup Air Force General, her mother had been the target when both were picked up by DINA intelligence agents. Bachelet's mother suffered the brunt of the torture and was held incommunicado in the isolation tower. Unlike the men, female detainees of Villa Grimaldi usually were jailed together and could talk with each other. Decades later, these bonds remain very strong, Matta highlighted. Matta also confirmed that President Bachelet's boyfriend had been a DINA collaborator, but he later disappeared from Villa Grimaldi without a trace, and is presumed dead.

Pro-U.S. Guide and Investigator

¶4. In addition to his other activities, Matta is currently an Embassy consular warden and Trinity College's resident director of the Trinity-in-Santiago Program. Matta lived in exile in the United States (his "second home") between 1976 and 1991. After working in several unskilled jobs in New York and San Francisco, Matta became a private investigator, a job he said later helped him advance several human rights cases in the Chilean judiciary involving victims that were detained at Villa Grimaldi.

¶5. Through interviews, legal records and disappearance reports, Matta has been able to document the presence of thousands of torture and disappearance victims at Villa Grimaldi between 1973 and 1978. He helped identify approximately 160 of the estimated 250 DINA intelligence agents who worked at the site until mid-1978. Matta noted that the detention and disappearance of a pregnant Spanish woman at Villa Grimaldi formed part of the case against General Pinochet in London.

¶6. Matta added that when he returned to Chile in 1991, he observed a high level of self-censorship among Chileans. Whenever he would speak of torture during the Pinochet regime among friends, even his most leftist acquaintances showed discomfort. Matta praised the Ambassador for taking the initiative to visit Villa Grimaldi, noting that to his knowledge this was the first time a sitting U.S. Ambassador had visited a former torture center in Latin America. Matta hoped such visits would help heal the wounds of the past. He said that Chilean views about the past -- particularly about torture -- are changing and Chileans are increasingly more open-minded about discussing sensitive topics.

¶7. A leader of the Socialist Youth in the 1970s, Matta spent approximately 10 days in Villa Grimaldi following his detention at another torture site. He later recuperated for several weeks at another location before being released when the physical signs of torture had disappeared, which was the norm for survivors.

Favorable Media Coverage

¶8. On February 1, the "Santiago Times" reprinted a translation of the Ambassador's entry in the Villa Grimaldi guest book, which had been forwarded by Matta to the English language daily: "In the name of my country, I would like to express our profound sympathy to all the victims of torture. I hope that this place can contribute to the spirit of "Never Again" all over the world." Post has added the Ambassador's visit to the Embassy website.

¶9. "El Mostrador" online news service interviewed Ambassador Kelly on February 1 about his interest in seeing the Villa Grimaldi Peace Park. "Kelly's visit to the memorial of the victims of abuses committed by the Pinochet dictatorship is unprecedented.... Kelly said he was deeply moved.... He expressed... sympathy toward the victims, and hoped that the memorial would help prevent such abuses from happening again."

¶10. The Ambassador told the news service: "It is very important to have a memorial, because as has been said in Chile, 'there is no tomorrow without a yesterday.' I deeply admire the ability of Chilean society to look to the future with tolerance, but without forgetting what happened in past years. That is an indication of a very strong democracy," said Kelly. The Ambassador emphasized the need to "condemn all human rights violations, regardless of the political ideology from which they stem. I believe we should all oppose any type of injustice ... showing consistency in that practice."

¶11. "El Mostrador" also interviewed Margarita Romero, the Vice President of the Villa Grimaldi Corporation (which operates the park). She valued Ambassador Kelly's visit, but said she would hope to see more consistency on the part of the U.S. government in upholding human rights. "I value his visit as that of any individual who is influential. This place is for important people, such as the U.S. representative in Chile, to show (them) the atrocities committed in our country."

KELLY